

FACTS ABOUT THE IMPERIAL VALLEY STRIKE, 1961

THE IMPERIAL VALLEY: Year-round growing season and rich irrigated land enable Imperial County to dominate the nation's production of winter lettuce and carrots, spring melons, and other major crops.

Industrialized corporation farming has advanced farther in the Imperial Valley than any area in the world of comparable size. Despite the fact that it is irrigated by Federally financed water, the 160-acre limitation is evidently ignored--average farm acreage is over 380. The average "farm" was valued in 1959 at \$205,000 and had sales of over \$100,000, four times the California average. 70% of the land is absentee owned; 20% is controlled by local corporations; only 10% is operated by independent, family type farmers. The ration of working farmers to hired farm workers is lower in Imperial Valley than any other county in the nation: 15.5%; the California ratio is 56.3%. Most of the growers in the Imperial Valley are also packers and shippers, which means they eliminate (and make the profits of) the middle - men with whom most growers must deal: 38,042 of the Valley's 40,362 acres of lettuce are operated by grower-shippers, only 2,320 by independent farmers (SOURCE: 1959 Census of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture).

Despite these competitive advantages to growers, farm wages in the Imperial Valley are far below the already low average for the rest of the state: from 1950 to 1960 the "prevailing rate" in Imperial County was frozen at 70 cents per hour, although counties farther north, growing competitive crops, were paying as much as \$1.00 per hour and sometimes more. Similarly, working conditions in California's most favored growing area have historically been the worst in the state.

Despite the industrialized character of agriculture in the Imperial Valley, farm workers have not enjoyed the benefits of unionization which prevail in non-agricultural industries; on the contrary, one of the major causes of the present strike is the fact that the growers, faced with unionized packing sheds, moved their packing operation out into the fields where it could be done by cheap non-union Mexican contract labor. In effect, the growers used the power of the U.S. Government through the Mexican National program, supposedly designed to remedy a "shortage" of American workers, to put qualified domestic laborers out of work and to destroy their union. In recent years, since the growers moved the packing operation into the fields, an increasing proportion of the farm labor in the Valley has been done by "braceros"-- Mexican contract workers--the proportion reaching 95% in some crop-activities.

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO ORGANIZE: there have been many previous attempts to organize among the agricultural workers of the Imperial Valley, all suppressed--by the growers, by the local law-enforcement agencies, more or less brutally and with little concern for the legal and human rights of the strikers, and above all because of the overwhelmingly superior economic power of the growers who, while decrying the organization of their powerless workers, are well organized themselves. For those interested in these previous attempts, or who doubt the assertions of the foregoing sentence, the following sources may be consulted: Taylor, Mexican Labor in the United States; Jameson, Labor Unionism In American Agriculture; McWilliams, Factories in the Fields; Hearings of the LaFollette Committee, U.S. Senate, Part 55, 1941 Hearings; Myers, The Position of Farm Workers in Federal and State Legislation; League for Industrial Democracy and National Sharecroppers Fund, Down on the Farm, the Plight of Agricultural Labor (the latter two are briefer and more general, and may be obtained from SCAL).

THE 1961 STRIKE: Background: in 1955, after the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA) Local 78, CIO, had succeeded in bringing union conditions to lettuce packing shed workers, the growers responded by moving lettuce packing from sheds into the fields; government agencies were prevailed upon by growers to certify a "labor shortage" in the fields, and the use of braceros was authorized (they may be used only in field operations) at less than half the wages formerly received by lettuce cutters and packers. Since then, maintaining that a packing operation is a packing operation wherever it occurs, the Packinghouse Workers have continuously striven to return union conditions to lettuce cutters and packers.

In 1961, in an attempt to forestall "labor trouble", the Imperial Valley Farmers Association promulgated a wage increase, to 90 cents an hour in the lettuce harvest.

The Packinghouse Workers, however, requested \$1.25 per hour, union recognition, job seniority procedures, sanitary facilities, and other minimum benefits for lettuce workers. The Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), AFL-CIO, joined with the UPWA to secure a base among lettuce workers for the organization of other crops. Growers' organizations refused to negotiate with the workers' organizations, or to answer their letters.

The main events of the strike: January 5: Unions hold mass meeting in Calexico. Vote to hold "demonstration" next day, and to strike during week of January 16 if employers continue to refuse negotiations. January 16: strike begins at Bruce Church ranch. Unions open soup kitchens for strikers and their families. January 17: 600 braceros removed from Church ranch, leaving 146. (Public Law 78, which authorizes importation of Mexican nationals as laborers, specifies that "No Mexican worker shall be used to fill any job which the Secretary of Labor finds is vacant because the occupant is out on strike or locked out in the course of a labor dispute." Article 22.) El Centro judge enjoins unions from picketing Church ranch. Strikes begin at two fields of Charles Freedman Co. January 18: Strike at Jackson Produce Co. Injunction against picketing at Freedman Co. fields. January 19: Strikes at Royal Packing Co. and J.J. Crosetti Co. Ranches. Unions criticize Dept. of Labor for permitting "use of braceros as pawns...". Dept. of Labor warns growers they may lose bracero certification "if they persist in using braceros as strikebreakers". January 26: U.S. Dept. of Labor (USDL) orders braceros withdrawn from Jackson Produce Co., struck since January 18. January 27: Superior Judge issues permanent injunction prohibiting union picketing at Church and Freedman fields. Unions strike Bud Antle, world's largest lettuce grower, and Salinas Valley Vegetable Exchange fields. February 1: U.S. District Judge issues restraining order permitting growers to move braceros from a picketed field to another one. February 2: 300 domestic workers sit down outside gates of largest bracero camp in Imperial Valley. Sheriff and 60 deputies order demonstrators to disperse. When they refuse, he arrests 13 leaders. February 3: Mexican Embassy requests Secty. of Labor to remove braceros from Imperial Valley. Calls District Court order "...an affront to the sovereignty of Mexico...with all the overtones of holding Mexican citizens in peonage." February 8: USDL announces that about 1/3 of braceros on struck farms--i.e. 600--will be removed. February 9: 42 union members arrested on variety of charges--including top union leadership.

It is clear that the union has not only had to face the economically more powerful growers' associations but that it has also been harassed by local courts and police authorities which seem to be on call to grower interests.

WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR THE FARM WORKERS OF IMPERIAL VALLEY: Citizen groups are beginning to form all over the state of California to aid the strikers. Groups in Southern California are sending food and clothing. Because we are so distant from the strike, we are asking for funds to aid the strikers. All funds will be sent directly to strike headquarters in El Centro, California. In a letter to Students' Committee for Agricultural Labor (SCAL), Norman Smith, California Director of AWOC, said, "We welcome the assistance of citizens of the State of California in our effort. In a real sense, this is a drive for justice for all working people in the State. Eroded working conditions for one sector of the population sooner or later erode working conditions for all. And, by the same token, improved working conditions for farm laborers in the Imperial Valley will, sooner or later, have a beneficial effect upon the economy of all California".

GIVE \$\$\$ NOW! PLAN TO ATTEND THE RALLY TO AID IMPERIAL VALLEY STRIKERS-----
RALLY TO BE HELD THE EVENING OF FEBRUARY 24. SPEAKERS AND PLACE TO BE ANNOUNCED.
MAKE CHECKS PAYABLE TO "IMPERIAL VALLEY STRIKE FUND". HELP PROVIDE FOOD AND SHELTER
FOR HUNDREDS OF FAMILIES WHO ARE NOW ON STRIKE. SEND DONATIONS TO 1631A WALNUT ST. BERKELEY
CAMPUS CAMPAIGN SPONSORED BY STUDENTS' COMMITTEE FOR AGRICULTURAL LABOR (SCAL). John Griffiths, Executive-Secretary; Mike Miller, Campaign Chairman. For further information call TH 1-4810 or TH 5-6574, or go to campaign table at Sather Gate.